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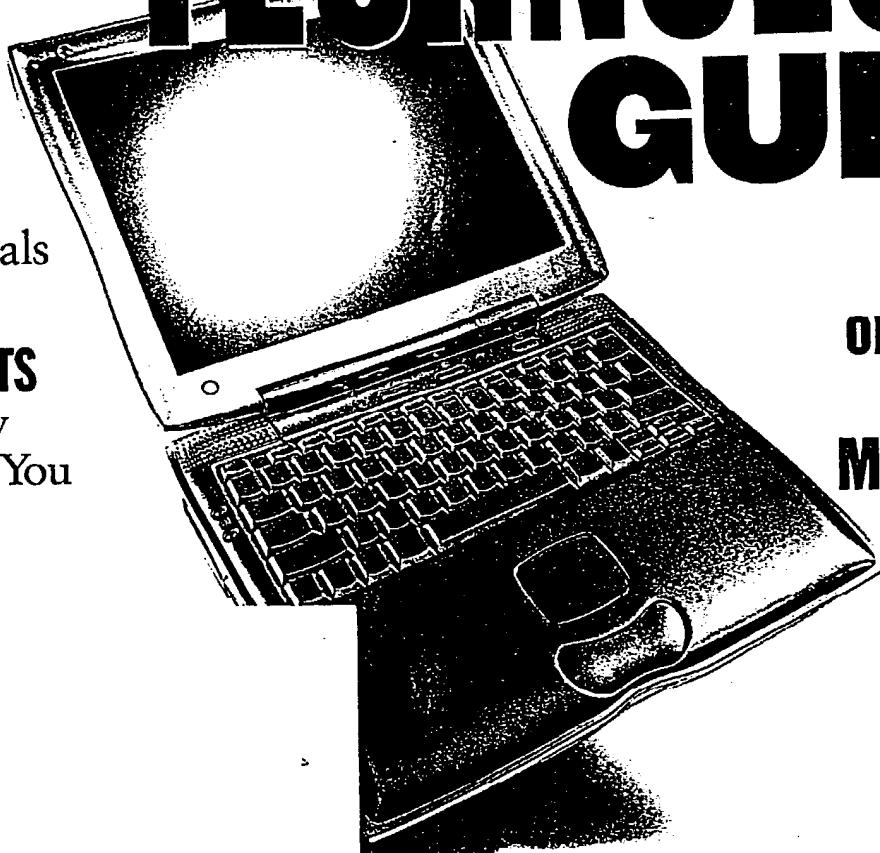
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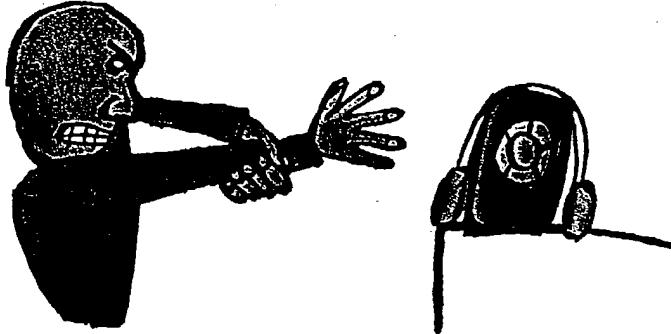
Unsound Files

About to buy an MP3 player? Here are three reasons why you should hold off.

Should you get an MP3 player? When the first portable models came out a year or so ago, most likely you were a little wary about spending \$200 on an untested product. But with the explosion of new, better-quality MP3 players on the market this winter—the Nomad, jazPiper, I-Jam, RaveMP, Lyra—it must be time to buy, right?

Not so fast. It's true that the second-generation portables are better than the original Rio. It's a lot easier to convert your CD collection into computer files and download customized albums onto your player. That means you can edit out all the filler songs on an album and cut right to the favorites. The end result? Portable, CD-quality sound with no skipping. Some of the new models even have advanced features: FM radios, car adapters and user-friendly organizers to sort your songs.

But there are still drawbacks that make it prudent to wait for the next wave to come out before you open your wallet. For one thing, most MP3 players offer 64 megabytes of memory, enough for about an hour of high-quality music. That might be enough for a quick jog, but it's not going to satisfy you on those road trips. And add-on memory isn't cheap: An extra 32MB—that's about a half-hour—on Creative's Nomad will run you \$89.99.



Second, there's the issue of compatibility. MP3 is just one format for digital music. There's also Windows Media, Liquid Audio and RealNetworks' G2. The music industry's Secure Digital Music Initiative has yet to announce which electronic-music format it will support. When it does, it might make every other format obsolete. Only one device currently on the market—RCA's Lyra—is upgradable to support new formats.

And new developments in the pipeline are worth waiting for. Look for memory capacity to increase significantly over the next year, says Jeremy Schwartz, a senior analyst at Forrester Research. Most exciting, says Rob Enderle, vice president of the Giga Information Group, are MP3 players with the capacity to store and play 10 to 12 hours of music. These should hit the market some time in the next several months. Just in time for that tax refund.

—Jason Tanz

Heard On The Net

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Get the Message

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For business travelers, missed messages and the trail of faxes that are always one hotel behind are all-too-familiar inconveniences of life on the road. But three little words could help restore a modicum of order to the itinerary: unified messaging services. These Web sites, which combine e-mail, voice mail and faxes into a



single mailbox, are sprouting up all over.

Onebox.com (www.onebox.com) is one of the better unified messaging services out there, and it's free. Simply dial the number you've been assigned, enter your PIN, and you can access your voice mail. Or you can access your mailbox through Onebox.com's Web site. Log on to retrieve e-mail and faxes and, provided your computer has speakers and a sound card, play your voice mail messages online. A service called myTalk.com goes one step further. It reads you your e-mail and lets you respond over the phone.

—Amy Gunderson